



Need a vaccine? Planet Princeton and local volunteers want to help



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Krystal Knapp has always tried to engage readers of her local news site, Planet Princeton. But she took that effort to new levels during the pandemic, helping people access unemployment benefits and food — even guiding them on how to access vaccines.

“Seniors started calling me and saying, ‘I can’t figure out how to get a vaccine appointment,’” Knapp said. They were spending hours on the phone on hold, dealing with websites that were crashing, and wondering what they were doing wrong. “These are people in their 70s and 80s. To respond, I decided I’m going to make a spreadsheet.”

Fast forward a few months and Knapp has teamed up with two other highly motivated New Jersey residents to recruit over 175 volunteers and build one of the most comprehensive and reliable statewide databases of where and how to get vaccinated. Just as doctors,

nurses and first responders have stepped up during the crisis, Vaccinate NJ may be a journalist's way to help — by making life-saving information as easy to access as possible.

Knapp initially created a Google spreadsheet where she crowdsourced information on vaccination sites, such as whether appointments were available and who was eligible to get them. As word got out, some people started updating the spreadsheet regularly to keep it up-to-date.

Around the same time, Leon Wu, a software engineer and graduate of Princeton High School, decided to create a website explaining who was eligible for the vaccine. When he learned about Knapp's work, he reached out to join forces.

"If there were similar efforts, I'd prefer to coordinate with them rather than be siloed off," Wu said.

A few weeks later, Rahway resident Taylor Calise, another software engineer looking for ways to make vaccine information more accessible, reached out to help.

Wu created the website, and Calise transferred the Google Sheet into a sortable database that automatically pulls in the latest information available from the State of New Jersey's website, which cuts down on the number of pharmacies the volunteers have to call daily to keep information current.

The three of them have embraced social media wherever it can help them: a Discord channel to coordinate volunteers, Reddit discussion boards to share helpful hints such as when to call for appointments, and Twitter to share information. They want to set up a WhatsApp hotline so people can post questions in Spanish and get answers from a volunteer, and they have applied for a grant to build up the site and keep it going until April. So far, any payments have come out of their own pockets.

"Honestly, that cost does not matter much to me," Calise said. "I want to help people get vaccinated, and I know these efforts are critical to ending this pandemic."

They have all had their share of long nights working on Vaccinate NJ, but their work has made a difference to many. They don't know exactly how many people they have helped, but their Twitter account has over 32,000 followers, and an initial bit.ly link that Knapp shared drew 70,000 unique views within two weeks. Wu added that daily site traffic from Google Analytics is "somewhere in the several thousands per day."

"Even if someone doesn't get a vaccine through checking availability on our site, the website still helps reduce load on the medical system's phones," he noted.

Recently, the state's Office of Innovation even reached out to meet with the team. State officials adopted some of their ideas into their listings, but Knapp said the government site is still limited — and changing that requires a bureaucracy that sites like Vaccinate NJ don't have to worry about.

“It’s hard to turn a cruise ship around,” she said. “If you’re a speed boat, it’s easier.”

As the journalist among the trio, Knapp isn’t bothered that some of what she’s doing — including making calls on behalf of community members who need appointments — goes above and beyond the call of duty. It’s just par for the course when it comes to local journalism, she said.

During Hurricane Sandy, she slept next to the generator in the basement of the Princeton Police Department so that she would have enough battery to share vital information through Planet Princeton’s Facebook page. She generated over 500,000 views in the days to follow and created a hub for information such as which roads were blocked from flooding.

Amid the pandemic, Knapp has felt a similar call to duty. Rather than just write about COVID-19, she has found a way to mobilize the community to tackle the crisis.

“Instead of being top down, where journalists decide what the news is, we should be community driven,” she said. “Community journalists do, de facto, create community.”

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